

High School Lesson 3

Fact Sheet #3

A Brief History of Suffrage in the United States

In 1776, most states allowed only white male property owners the right to vote. By about 1820, however, ownership of property was no longer required to vote in most states, but voting was generally still restricted to white males. At this time, most African Americans in the South were still enslaved and women were generally viewed as physically and mentally inferior to men and, therefore, unfit to vote. Individual activists did call for an expansion of voting rights to all free men and women, but the idea was not popular.

The end of the Civil War brought an expansion of voting rights. The Fifteenth Amendment is one of the three “Civil War Amendments” (also known as the “Reconstruction Amendments”). The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment extended the protection of the Due Process and Equal Protection clauses to all citizens. The Fifteenth Amendment granted voting rights to black men.

Fifteenth Amendment

Section 1.

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Section 2.

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Many women were unhappy with the Fifteenth Amendment for obvious reasons. Some women had been arguing for the vote ever since the founding of the United States (for further information, see the letters between Abigail Adams and her husband, John Adams). The anti-slavery movement had been closely linked to the women’s suffrage movement before the war, and when women were purposefully excluded from the Fifteenth Amendment they felt betrayed. Some individual states granted women voting rights in the nineteenth century, but full voting rights for American women were not realized until the twentieth century. The Nineteenth Amendment was proposed in 1919 and ratified in 1920. Indiana, for example, did not allow women the vote until after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified!

Nineteenth Amendment

Section 1.

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

During WWII, President Franklin D. Roosevelt lowered the military draft age to eighteen; many people proposed lowering the voting age to eighteen as well. It didn't seem fair that someone could be old enough to be drafted, fight, and die for his country, yet not be old enough to vote. Still, it wasn't until 1971, during the Vietnam War, that the Twenty-sixth Amendment was ratified granting eighteen-year-olds the right to vote.

Twenty-sixth Amendment

Section 1.

The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.

Section 2.

The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Even though the Fifteenth Amendment granted African American men the right to vote in 1870, after Reconstruction ended many states passed so-called Jim Crow laws that restricted or prohibited African Americans from voting. Some states implemented literacy tests that disqualified black voters, and avoided disenfranchising illiterate whites by implementing a "Grandfather Clause." Anyone who failed the literacy test would be allowed to vote if their fathers and grandfathers had voted before 1867 (when, of course, African Americans were not allowed to vote). Even with a few modest gains in the early twentieth century, many if not most black Americans, especially in the South, were still not able to exercise their right to vote. It was not until the Civil Rights Acts of the 1950s and 1960s that they gained their right of suffrage. As the Civil Rights movement heated up, Southern states resisted desegregation and voting rights for African Americans. The violence that followed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 demonstrated the need for the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed literacy tests and allowed for federal marshals to enforce African American's voting rights in resistant states. The number of African Americans voting in the United States skyrocketed.